

## ***Blind Spots of Knowledge in Shakespeare and his World***

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### **I: Blind Spots: a concept and its typology**

When, in *King Lear*, the old man refuses to leave Gloucester despite his bidding, because Gloucester “cannot see [his] way,” the blind Gloucester replies, bitterly reflecting on his earlier failure to recognise his sons morally:

I have no way, and therefore want no eyes.  
I stumbled when I saw. Full oft 'tis seen,  
Our means secure us and our mere defects  
Prove our commodities... (F, 4.1.18–21).<sup>1</sup>

What do we see when we cannot see, or see defectively? How do our blind spots prove our commodities? By extension, what happens when seeing and knowing are prised apart? What is the epistemic purchase of unseeing? In the same play, Lear questions the familiar sensory hierarchy of Aristotelian epistemology, where “sight best helps us to know things,” a privileging also familiar from the Platonic tradition where knowing is a kind of seeing.<sup>2</sup> Learning the cost of his emotional and ethical misrecognitions with each passing moment, he ironically severs the function of seeing from that of knowing oneself, and even from being known and knowing the other: “Doth any here know me? This is not Lear: / [...] Where are his eyes? / [...] Who is it that can tell me who I am?” (1.4.246–50). As John Berger writes, “it is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world,” but “the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.”<sup>3</sup> He posits seeing as a more complex, more active, more mobile activity than a purely optical function, “a question of mechanically reacting to stimuli”: “It can only be thought of in this way if one isolates the small part of the process which concerns the eye’s retina.”<sup>4</sup>

Yet even the internal processes of the retina are more dynamic and less “settled” than – literally – meets the eye, which sees more than it sees “through means secure.” The assumed relation in social discourse between ocular vision as vehicle and perception as tenor is unsettlingly reversible. So the optical metaphor remains functional, and has an unexpected synergy with the social, psychological and interpretative acts of seeing to which Berger has trained us to be attentive. The “blind spot” is a part of the retina – the optic disc or nerve-head – which lacks photoreceptor cells. Hence, no vision is detectable at this spot in the visual field. But, by a curious process of readjustment, the brain “reads” the blind spot by interpolating it with information from the surrounding field, including the other eye: so the blind spot itself is not visible to the eye to which it belongs. But because of its invisibility in the “normal” sense, it induces an optically inventive way of seeing, activating tools of perception not ordinarily in use. It is, thus, analogous at once to a particular point in a larger picture that, for different possible reasons, we fail to see; and to a mental act of seeing that makes up for what is off-scene by seeing indirectly, inferentially and imaginatively. But there is a further twist in the paradoxical reach of the blind spot as metaphor: in a digital photo of the retina, it looks dazzling. Thus, it is at once blind in that it cannot see, or be visible to vision; and blindingly bright in its dense, nerve-packed opacity when imaged.

It was not till 1660 that the French physicist Edme Marriotte – sensationally – discovered and documented the blind spot. Yet the perceptual implications of the scotoma in any given monocular field of vision were understood, and in productive use, in the cultural imaginary of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries: a contrapuntal strand in the dominant ocularcentrism of its texture. Shakespeare, for one, seems to have “known” the blind spot of the eye and the mind well before it floated within the ken of science. The viewing relations and optical agencies implicated by its “blindness” inform and structure his explorations of the forms, processes and inter-subjectivity of knowing, our possible engagements with it, and the business of representation – making visible and thereby knowable. The love-juice with which Puck streaks the lovers’ eyes in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, from which the dream of the night arbitrarily ensues, engendering at once “hateful fantasies” and unlikely “[enthralments]” (2.1.258; 3.1.116), makes the Platonic optics of love run helter skelter – a playful send-up of what George Hakewill (and Stuart Clark, after him) call “the vanity of the eye”: the assumptions of the rationalism and primacy of sight.<sup>5</sup> But the imperfections of the eye had particular applications in drama, not least because of the ontology of the early modern theatre which relied on activating modes of seeing what could not be shown: routinely asking the audience to see with “parted eye”.<sup>6</sup> Shakespeare picked up on the theatrical potential of this condition as well as its demands, enjoining his viewers to see Dover Cliff while looking at flat ground, or the vasty fields of France within the wooden O of the stage. But he also tuned into the affective, ethical, perceptual and mimetic scope of blindness, blind-spotting, and indeed blind-spot-spotting, pushing the implications of seeing what is not visible, and not seeing what is, by deploying his medium. Shakespeare’s works are our focus, but not our horizon. This volume, likewise, is an indicative probe rather than an exhaustive exploration. We hope that it will thematise an internally complementary process, between text and hermeneutics, and make it available for a wider range of works in the early modern period.

In common parlance, a blind spot is an obstructed view, or an instance of partial or partisan perception, or even a localised lack of understanding: its meaning sliding from the physical to the cognitive to the epistemological. Integral to Shakespeare’s recreation of human reality, both individual and relational, this function determines the first kind of blind spots in his works which repeatedly stage moments of unmastered and unmasterable knowledge, whether it is because characters cannot or will not “know” it. This can take the form of a perceptual failure or denial within the fiction that can exact a devastating cost, as when Emilia in Shakespeare’s *Othello* – and perhaps Gertrude in *Hamlet*, especially the Folio text – resist knowledges about their own agency and their husband’s designs that are accessible, but emotionally unaffordable.<sup>7</sup> Obscured by the psyche, they surface like spectres at key moments of re-cognition – as when Emilia mutters, on learning of Iago’s villainy, “I thought so then; I’ll kill myself for grief” (*Othello* 5.2.192). As Berger says, “to look is an act of choice”; so is not to look.<sup>8</sup> Or think of *The Winter’s Tale* when Leontes – with doomful shades of Oedipus – not only declares the oracle void of truth, but perversely refuses to see the corrosive damage his jealous fury is wreaking on his loved ones, and interprets Mamillius’s reactive sickness in the light of the only knowledge in his sight: “Conceiving the dishonour of his mother! / He straight declin’d, drooped, took it deeply, / [...] / And downright languish’d” (*The Winter’s Tale* 2.3.13–17). Looking the obvious in the face, Leontes fails to see it. His vision is so skewed by his ‘too

much [belief]’ in his ‘own suspicion’ (3.2.151) that he forgets the sanity of seeing at its simplest, most lucid level as he declares its irrelevance in proving his wife’s assumed guilt:

... Camillo’s flight,  
 Added to their familiarity,  
 (Which was as gross as ever touch’d conjecture,  
 That lack’d sight only, nought for approbation  
 But only seeing ... (2.1.174–78)

Cognitive blind spots can show us how precariously close suspicion is to conviction, and how hopelessly entangled knowledge is with the force of belief, for better or for worse.<sup>9</sup>

But let us take a more layered example – an instance of a blind spot of knowledge which slides from mimetic content to representational concern, operating not only at the threshold between the self and the other, but also between the text and the reader. Significantly, it is a scene of viewing. As the raped Lucrece laments at length before disclosing her plight to her husband in the narrative poem, *The Rape of Lucrece*, she comes to face a tapestry (or panel-painting) depicting the siege of Troy. In a crowded canvas, her eyes fasten on one detail, “a face where all distress is stelled” (l. 1444): this is “despairing Hecuba” (l. 1447), a passive sufferer with whom she can identify. “[Throwing] her eyes about the painting round,” she extends her lament to “who she finds forlorn” (1499–1500), all other figures and themes being (as it were) invisible to her eyes. But then she pauses on “the perjured Sinon” (l. 1522) – in her mind, the cause of Hecuba’s grief, having been the direct instrument of the siege of Troy. Indignant that he should have “so fair a form”, “with a mind so ill,” her outrage rises to destructive rage as she identifies him with her rapist Tarquin who had a similarly deceptive exterior:

Here, all enraged, such passion her assails,  
 That patience is quite beaten from her breast;  
 She tears the senseless Sinon with her nails,  
 Comparing him to that unhappy guest  
 Whose deed hath made herself herself detest. (ll. 1562–66)

In her fit of passion, she fails to see that the painted Sinon is “senseless”, and ends up destroying the art-work. Soon enough, she herself registers the hysteria, indeed almost ridiculousness, of her naïve response as a quieter maturity dawns:

At last she smilingly with this gives o’er:  
 “Fool, fool”, quoth she, “his wounds will not be sore”. (ll. 1567–68)

In a poem much engaged with the affect and ethics of response, especially to pain, Lucrece’s empathy may seem to qualify her to give the voiceless Hecuba’s grief a tongue, unlike Marcus’ rhetorical, aestheticising, over-eloquent attempt to speak for the raped, tongue-less Lavinia in the other work Shakespeare wrote about rape and representation around the same time as the poem: *Titus Andronicus*. Marcus’s dissonant address feels, even if it is not, emotionally detached from its subject, while Lucrece is not only both reader and writer, but subject as well as object. Yet

Lucrece's extreme identification makes her blind to the fundamental difference between art and life, if only for an extended moment. So here is a blind spot that confronts us, through textual inscription, with our own relation to works of art. Do we need to unsee the affective reality and subjecthood of characters within a fiction, to be sophisticated consumers of art? What are the limits of empathy in aesthetic response? Can identification – in feeling – be the blind spot which, instead of helping, closes the critical distance that empathy actively needs, as material for reaching across, as space for bridging? Dipping back, for a moment, from reflexive art into inset life, we might consider how Titus forgets basic distinctions in his ludicrously disproportionate railing against Marcus for killing a fly: 'How if that fly had a father and mother?' (*Titus Andronicus* 3.2.60). Pace the blind spot of certain strands of ecocritical readings of a seamless continuum between human and animal life in such moments, the theatre audience invariably laugh and share Marcus' incomprehension – "Alas, my lord, I have but kill'd a fly" – even while they register the extremity of grief that makes Titus over-identify with any infinitely suffering thing (*Titus*, 3.2.59). The tradition of archly witty exercises in the disproportion between a literary genre and its small subjects (and tropes) was established enough to provide a playfully parodic context to the fly-killing scene – from Lucian's encomium "In Praise of a Fly", to Spenser's "Muiopotmos, or the Fate of the Butterflie", and Donne's "The Flea".<sup>10</sup> The faintly ironic frames or overtones of these moments in Shakespeare refract our vision. A character's encounter with a fly, no less than another's with the painting of an epic war, raises questions about the blind spots of aesthetic encounter. What excesses of its own does tragedy tend not to acknowledge, which outsiders to the high tragic culture – a Moorish Aaron, say, "[prying] ... through the crevice of a wall" at the Roman Titus's hand being swapped for his son's heads – would laugh at till their "eyes were rainy like to his" (*Titus*, 5.1.114, 117)? In the 1590s, Shakespeare's 'crannied [holes]' tend to figure apertures through which one genre refracts into another, making us see in a different key. So the comic Bottom 'as' the tragic Pyramus pleads to his 'lovely wall': 'Show me thy chink, to blink through with mine eyne' (*Dream*, 5.1.156; 174).

Another instance of a blind spot presenting itself as an encounter *in* the text that invites a recalibrated encounter *with* the text is the double report of Brutus's wife Portia's death in *Julius Caesar*. Anyone who was taught by the late Tony Nuttall will have been faced with this puzzling re-occurrence in the Folio and asked to make sense of it. Is it another textual error or corruption? A repetition that someone – maybe Shakespeare – forgot to take out during some sort of process of revision? There are potential indications in the relevant section – not least in the variety of speech headings for *Cassi/Cas/Cass*, and the unique stage direction of "Boy" to replace Messala – of incomplete revision and interpolations at two stages of composition.<sup>11</sup> Here is the anomaly. Cassius and Brutus have uneasily made up after an angry altercation, but when Brutus intimates a hinterland of heart-struck sorrow – "O Cassius, I am sick of many griefs" – Cassius cannot resist a last jab: "Of your philosophy you make no use, / If you give place to accidental evils" (4.1.145–46). This prompts Brutus to reply, slightly defensively, "No man bears sorrow better. Portia is dead" (4.1.147), and leads him to disclose the terrible manner of her suicide. Cassius is suitably mortified, as this is a far stronger justification of Brutus's disturbed state of mind than his own poor excuse of a "rash humour" his mother gave him (4.1.120) for his own ill temper. The impact of the revelation seems about to be helpfully defused by the entrance of Lucius, and then of Messala and Titinius, allowing Brutus to stop Cassius from harping on the unbearable subject: "No more, I

pray you” (4.1.166). But Messala leads up, through probing questions, to the subject of Portia’s death. Trying and failing to throw him off track, Brutus realises he has to engage and pretends he has not heard anything: “Now, as you are a Roman, tell me true.” Messala comes right back at him on his terms: “Then like a Roman bear the truth I tell, / For certain, she is dead, and by strange manner” (4.1.186, 4.1.187–88). Brutus “reacts” with what, to Cassius, is at once duplicity and an astonishing display of fortitude:

Why, farewell, Portia: we must die, Messala.  
With meditating that she must die once  
I have the patience to endure it now. (4.1.190–92)

Messala observes, with hushed admiration, “Even so great men great losses should endure” (4.1.193). Cassius, more knowingly, remarks:

I have as much of this in art as you,  
But yet my nature could not bear it so. (4.1.194–195)

Are we to assume, because it lacks immediate coherence, that the double announcement must be an oversight? Or should we read the duplication as a dramatic shape, inducting us into a way of seeing what cannot be owned within the parameters of the Rome that these characters inhabit: the parallel processes of a keenly felt challenge to Brutus’s Roman identity; the inseparability of this identity from the ethic of Stoicism – the “philosophy” Cassius alludes to; the distance between Brutus’s private, emotional self and his public, political persona; the high Stoic manner as the stuff of performance, and the affective repressions and evasions it demands? If we had the second report alone, we might have found Brutus’ response almost inhuman – exemplifying the static model of Stoicism as a freedom from emotional disturbance.<sup>12</sup> If we had the first alone, we would only have seen his fragility. Together, they show us the dynamic arc from a bleak, all too human bereavement to a formal, willed control of emotions. This is also an insight into the half-lit cognitive crevices and bypaths of the intense relationship between Brutus and Cassius. Nuttall suggests that this textual crux – which has divided editors - invites us to step out of the “customary canons of art” by probing the tautness of the moment in terms of the emotional life of the characters; to read nature into art.<sup>13</sup> This feels right. And such redirection of attention is, typically, a function of our encounters with blind spots in art-works.

The implication of re-casting seeing distinguishes a range of Shakespearean blind spots, often combining with other properties. The recalibration that is so central to the optical functions of the blind spot models a hermeneutic encounter where the conventional processing of information is disrupted and diverted. When inscribed in the action, this has the potential to be tragic: think of situations where characters misread from circumstantial evidence, supplementing what is invisible or obscure by bending their gaze, reading inferentially from a semiotic neighbourhood. Typically, this variety of oblique reading operates in an evidentiary dramatic structure. When Diana in *All’s Well that Ends Well* enargeically presents a ring to incriminate Bertram – “O, behold this ring” – the Countess is convinced that she is his wife and, further, that he has murdered his wife: “That ring’s a thousand proofs” (*All’s Well* 5.3.191, 199). Yet as the plot unravels, it turns out to prove, rather, the manipulative potency of visual tokens presented as synecdochic parts of an invisible scenario. We also see

the ironic susceptibility of a defendant to a counter-use of over-freighted signs, as Bertram stakes his honesty on the same object:

If you shall prove  
This ring was ever hers, you shall as easy  
Prove that I husbanded her bed in Florence... (5.3.124–26)

In the event, the ring does prove he had meant to sleep with Diana, but not with any intention to marry her, and that he had in fact slept with his lawfully wedded wife – showing how evidential inference from sensible contiguous signs can be a slippery index to both deed and thought.<sup>14</sup> Emotional situations dominated by sexual jealousy tend to focus such processes with particular imaginative force, for in the grip of passionate suspicion, we make the world we see, though we take our cues from the visible world around us: Othello “wear[s]” his eyes to watch his wife but images what is not through his mind (3.3.198). *Cymbeline* offers a paradigmatic example in Posthumus’s disastrous mis-seeing of Iachimo’s vividly visual evocation of “corporal [signs]” of his supposed enjoyment of Imogen’s body, backed up with visible material tokens from the alleged scene of “incontinency” (*Cymbeline* 2.4.119, 127). But the foregrounded and dilatory *jouissance* of Iachimo’s narrative recreation, both when he convinces Posthumus and when he recounts the bedroom scene again by way of confession, manifests Shakespeare’s acute alertness to the potential non-congruence of *enargeia* with evidence: an equation derived from the Latin rhetorical tradition, and more specifically, its translation of *enargeia* as *evidentia*.<sup>15</sup> Their assumed identity is undercut as rhetorical temptation is shown to outstrip legal necessity. So, in the Shakespearean theatre, *enargeia* becomes the blind spot of the judicial imagination, with rhetoric at once shaping, and helping us deconstruct, the temptations and errors of the mind’s eye.

Yet, in an almost chiasmic move, precisely such cognitive diversions can take a productive form when the text demands a re-orientation of *our* position as the knowing subject to the object of knowledge. In *Troilus and Cressida*, faced with a Cressida he cannot recognise by his unitary code of human nature – “This is, and is not, Cressid” – Troilus muses on “the spacious breadth of this division” which “admits no orifex for a point as subtle / As Ariachne’s broken woof to enter” (5.2.146; 150–52). There is an obvious wobble in the text here, which the Riverside editors call “Shakespeare’s error for the name of Arachne, who, according to Ovid ... was turned into a spider by Pallas.”<sup>16</sup> But the designation of “error” may be a blind spot refusing to see around this fracture in the text, this visible obscurity, to find the luminousness of Shakespeare’s conflation. For if he is half-remembering Arachne’s spider-web in talking of Ariadne’s thread, given to Theseus to help him out of the Cretan maze, that would be a glimpse of how the tremor of a single image can capture the closeness between the sinister labyrinth that traps and the clue that guides.

If Shakespeare’s own errors are acts of mingled memory opening up a corridor of knowingness that “correct” rendering – or seeing straight – would have left closed, his characters’ mistaking eyes seem, often, to similarly defer the closure of a text. Sometimes this can take the opposite form to seeing “double” (*Dream*, 4.1.190): collapsing persons and identities that should be distinct. Even as he correctly sees Polixenes’ features in his son, Florizel, who presents Perdita as his wife, Leontes fails to recognise his long-lost daughter. The truancy here is deeper and darker than mere

sensory failure. When Florizel says that his father, Polixenes, would “grant precious things as trifles” at his old friend Leontes’s bidding, Leontes immediately replies that in that case he would “beg [his] precious mistress / Which he counts but as a trifle.” If this is a joke, its uneasiness is sealed by Paulina’s reprimand: “Sir, my liege, / Your eye hath too much youth in’t,” reminding Leontes of Hermione’s superior mature beauty even at the time of her death. Leontes replies hastily: “I thought of her / Even as these looks I made” (*The Winter’s Tale* 5.1.222–27). This moment was bound to call up, in Shakespeare’s theatre, the incestuous passion of the father for the daughter in the Shakespeare’s source-text, Greene’s hugely popular prose romance *Pandosto* (1588).<sup>17</sup> Indeed, it anticipates that other glimpse of kink through a literary pre-history – Ovid’s Pygmalion and his sex-doll – at the moment when Leontes moves to kiss the supposed statue of Hermione and Paulina restrains him, saying that the paint is still wet. Miscognition in the plot, here, acts as a productive distortion of the intertextual lens, generating new interpretative possibilities. The mischief written into such errant seeing could be seen to work at the expense of the characters’ sense of self, but as aesthetic capital, if played with suitable authenticity on stage. Somewhat similarly to *Troilus and Cressida*, blind spots of knowledge at moments such as these could enact the ironic variance between the mimetic reality of the characters’ emotional lives and their helplessly pre-scripted status in literary history. Yet, at the same time, blind spots have a way of teetering on the verge between almost alienated subjecthood and subjective emotional lives. For Leontes’s encounter with the grown-up Perdita is not just a hint of incestuous attraction drifting in from the genetic past of the text, but also a deep longing for her to *be* Hermione in the living moment, just as that later moment of a near-kiss embodies a heart-rending desire for the return of love. These oddly disruptive moments of temporal telescoping are little *puncta* in “the optical unconscious” – to borrow Rosalind Krauss’s term; opening not only into corridors of intertextual and psychosexual memory but also into wellsprings of affective fantasies that are unutterable except through indirection because they are so extreme in their improbability.<sup>18</sup> They fray the surface of the text to make us see both beneath, and beyond, what can be shown.

Blind spots such as these are also, potentially, a generic threshold. The glimpse of the buried knowledge of the father-daughter story in *The Winter’s Tale* is also the pivot on which genres turn: it contains in a single event the translation of Pandosto’s suicidally tragic passion into a tragicomedy of restoration, as if allowing desire to transit from repression to wish-fulfilment. “What you know, you know,” says Iago, in an ultimate defiance of evidential epistemology and propelling an unbearable tragedy to its unyielding end in *Othello* (5.2.303). But the words his line echoes most closely are from Dromio of Ephesus, in the early comedy, *The Comedy of Errors*: “I know what I know” (3.1.11). Are cognitive blind spots – faced or fashioned – generically Janus-faced? Or do they face us with the contrivance of generic structures by pushing the bounds of one genre towards another? To reclaim a responsible relation with its living material, for example, comedy forges a language that works against the grain of its own conventional underpinnings: witness Hermione’s anguished but sharp question to Leontes when he first erupts with jealous fury: “What is this? Sport?” (*The Winter’s Tale* 2.1.58); or Beatrice’s seemingly disproportionate and generically out-of-place demand of Benedick, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, after his friend emotionally kills hers: “Kill Claudio” (*Much Ado* 4.1.289). In the final moments of the Folio tragedy of *Lear*, on the other hand, Lear’s blind spot and ours come together as opposed generic affects brush against each other. With the dead Cordelia in his

arms, Lear glides from recognition – “Thou’lt come no more” (5.3.281) – to possible misrecognition, dying on these words:

Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,  
Look there, look there. (5.3.284–85)

The range of ways in which directors, actors, editors and indeed readers want to interpret, and have rendered, these lines mirrors the blind spots in our own imagined vision of tragic ending, tragic magnitude and tragic knowledge.

The agency of the theatre vis-à-vis textually open and indeterminate moments brings us to the blind spot of embodiment. Shakespeare’s “open silences”, to borrow Philip Maguire’s phrase, become an operative counterpart to what cannot be shown.<sup>19</sup> What cannot be heard, no less than the invisible, directs our attention to the ways in which performance can forestall closure. On occasions, like the errors in or of the text, these mark portals into textual prehistories and reach for information in the ‘backward and abysm of time’.<sup>20</sup> In North’s Plutarch (1579), Shakespeare’s source-text for *Coriolanus*, Tacita is the Roman Goddess of silence: “[Numa] taught the Romans to reverence one of them above all the rest, who was called *Tacita*, as ye would say *Lady Silence*”.<sup>21</sup> As with the affective translation of Ovid and Greene in *The Winter’s Tale*, so here, the narrative source is made to speak its silence on stage. On the triumphant return of Coriolanus to Rome in Act II, his greeting to his wife Virgilia turns the spotlight on her eloquently speechless presence: “My gracious silence, hail!” (2.1.175). Prefiguration helps cast silence as an island of sacrosanct intimacy and tenderness in a clamorous scene; it also makes Virgilia’s inwardness shimmer – intimating its reality but not giving away its substance. The blind spot of the play-text, in examples such as this, intimates a model of memory and marks a type of literary interrelation between past and present.

The other kind of non-verbal gap – the one explored by Maguire – consists of features that determine the meanings of speechless moments by drawing on the emotional environment *around* them. The mutilated Lavinia in *Titus*, speechless from Act 2 scene 4 onwards, in a different context, is the most vivid presence on stage; the theatre has to decide how to mediate, or make known, her inner state through action. But if this is a moment that can draw both horizontally and vertically (so to speak) from the affective neighbourhood in the play as well as from its Ovidian past, the silent Isabella facing the Duke’s uneasy speech at the end of *Measure for Measure* presents a gap in the fabric of the action, which can only take shape in performance, out of the extra-textual resources of the play itself: I have seen as many interpretations as there are Isabellas on stage. The play-text, here, acts as the retinal nerve-sheet, where moments of silence are openings for actors and director to fill in, just as the eye – helped by the brain – fills in the cavity where the optic nerve enters with information from the adjoining field. These blind spots, then, create an interface at which choices need to be made. Barthes talks of the distance between crude knowledge and subtle life as one that is “corrected” by literature, just as the brain corrects the visual void of the blind spot.<sup>22</sup> Yet, the model is less stable than “correction” when it comes to performance. Such choices in the theatre need to negotiate the mobile boundary between knowledge as lived experience within the fiction and what the text knows; and in turn between both of these and what – and



how much – the text would have the reader or viewer know. These imbrications create an ecology of knowledges that is never entirely predictable or fixable.

Irreducibility takes several forms. The Other is a foreign country, as so many plays show: witness *Othello* or *The Winter's Tale*, or, in a more metaphysical key, *Troilus*. But sometimes, so is the self. The inevitable partiality of self-knowledge is a trigger for the undoing of Lear, who “hath ever but slenderly known himself” (1.1.292–3); this in turn makes him blind to the difference between rhetoric and intention, between the effusive Regan or Goneril and the reticent Cordelia. But the unknowability of the self can take stranger forms. Early on in *Troilus*, Cressida uses the construct of an unknowable interior as a defence against the threatening ability of a world of men to exhaust her, and her identity, through their desire: “Then though my heart’s content firm love doth bear,/ Nothing of that shall from mine eyes appear” (1.2.254–55). But in a painful twist, when she does perhaps, finally and desperately, want to make herself known in a letter to Troilus, her intentional self is rendered unknowable as the play stops her mouth; Troilus shreds and scatters the letter, unread, declaring, ‘Words, words, mere words, no matter from the heart’ (5.3.108). The inexpressible becomes hopelessly entangled with the unknowable in a failed act of communication. There are cultural contexts in which such irony has particular resonance in the period’s literature. Despair at the inability to make one’s heart legible becomes the tragedy of the actively repentant conscience in the providentialist play *A Warning or Fair Women*.<sup>23</sup> When Anne Sanders, who stooped to folly and sought concealment of her guilt earlier, yearns to make her inward state visible and knowable to the world, the optative mode of her expression inscribes transparency as a fantasy: “...were my breast transparent, / That what is figured there, might be perceiv’d / Now should you see the very image of poore / And totter’d ruines, and a slain conscience...” (*Warning*, 2654–57). In *Troilus*, a play where reading – of others and of texts – is endless and endlessly relativised, the abortion of Cressida’s attempt to make and make known her own meaning has a wider philosophical dimension. Part of the play’s way of being true to this is to translate the author’s (real or feigned) cognitive aversion in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* – “Men seyn, I not, that she yaf him hir herte” (1050) –<sup>24</sup> to the text’s own reticence which takes over a character’s reticence, at once denying her agency in the lived situation and, possibly, preserving the mystery and indeterminacy of her selfhood at the aesthetic level. Even though Cressida cannot speak back and control or correct possible responses to her, Troilus’s epistemologically arrogant verdict mediating the unread letter to the audience is bound to be placed in the context of this hyper-mediated play’s by-now irreversible ironising of mediation. She remains the blind spot in the visual field of the dramatic action that the audience view; but the play itself has turned this field into a treacherous repository of corrective or supplementary information by this time. Blind spots such as these make unknowability unmissable, just as they often represent the limits of representation – as in scenes of sex and/or murder, whether in *Othello*, or in *Macbeth*. Consider the optically framed discovery scene in Heywood’s *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, where the defining sight is only evoked by its undemonstrability, as we see the probative husband enter his inner sanctum with a prayer to heaven to “keep [his] eyes,” to find his wife and her lover in bed, and rushing out crying, “O, O.”<sup>25</sup> The unseen bed-chamber is foregrounded as ocular proof, while the “dark lantern” with which he enters is an evocative object as well as a trope for making invisibility glow. The defiant obscurity of the inaudible and invisible textual moments we address incite and lure interpretation by their very

conspicuousness. Could we, then, talk of translucency as an emergent representational idiom in these knowing texts, locating opacity between construction and happening?

How, then, are we to know when not to fill the gaps? What are the limits of translation? Performance can forestall closure, yes; but individual performative events – narrative or theatrical – can also push particular meanings towards preservation. What do the cognitive withholdings of texts and authors tell us about the event of knowledge, or of the motives of knowing informing the hermeneutic act? The ending of Ivan Turgenev's narrative adaptation of Shakespeare's *Lear*, "King Lear of the Steppes," brilliantly plays with the possibilities and mirrors our own desires back to us, along with our disowning of them.<sup>26</sup> But the reader's expectation of Turgenev's narrative is also overlaid by recognition: rooted in a knowledge of the Lear story, its unmistakable referent; just as the Folio play of *Lear* itself plays with the audience's knowledge of the sentimental providentialism of the old play, *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* (1594). At the end of the tender, quasi-pastoral reunion scene between Lear and Cordelia, Lear pleads with his daughter: "Pray you now, forget and forgive" (4.6.77). This is the same Lear as the one who comes out with the dead Cordelia's body in his arms and declares that he has killed the slave that was "a-hanging" her (F, 5.3.248) – a far cry from the tediously pious Leir. In Turgenev, Harlov – the Lear character – is on top of his own house, which he had unwisely given away to his daughters, destroying it brick by brick and about to collapse with it, when Yvlempia – a complex "Cordelia" – tries to turn the wheel: "Forgive us. Forgive me" (162). In a reworking of the prison scene in *Lear*, she tenderly urges him to come down and live with her "as in Christ's own bosom" and pleads in a "caressing" voice, "forget the past. [...] Now forgive us" (163). But inexorably, he topples down with the house, his heavy frame crushed by the beam of the roof. As he lies hallucinating, his eyes fix on Yvlempia and "he [utters], barely audibly: 'Well, daughter ... It's you I won't for...'" His fracture is revealed by his autopsy, but the intended final words remains a mystery. The first-person narrator, a young boy at the time, is haunted by it:

What did he want to say to her as he died? I asked myself the whole way back home on my horse: "It's you I won't for-get..." or "It's you I won't for-give..."? [...] I decided in the end that he'd wanted to forgive. (266–67)

In this wishful rewriting, what stares back at us is the epistemological spuriousness of the closure we want, as well as a human need for it that is both experiential and aesthetic. The strand of primal vengefulness that is sporadically visible in Shakespeare's *Lear*, forms the texture of the weave in Turgenev's conception of Harlov; the familiar, canonised and more readily acknowledged dimensions of love, reunion and forgiveness in the father-daughter plot of *King Lear* are evoked to be relocated, with wistful gentleness, in fantasy. But while the knowledge we choose (or "decide" on) is fictive, the knowledge the narrative holds back, like Harlov's feelings – and perhaps unlike Iago's constructed interior – is "the signature of its plenitude." Like Barthes's "classic text," it remains pensive:

...replete with meaning..., it still seems to keep in reserve one last meaning, which it does not express, but whose place it keeps free and signifying. [...] Just as the pensiveness of a face signals that this head is full of language held

back...: like the visage, the text becomes expressive ...blessed with interiority...<sup>27</sup>

And we, on our blind-spotting tour, are left musing on the relation between the inexpressible and the unexpressed.

## II. Blind-spot-spotting: an adventure

Blind spots in Shakespeare, as we have seen, not only straddle mimesis and *poiesis*, but bring them into dialogue. Focusing on a range of different moments, and levels, of apparent obscurity, this book puts methods, motives and the ends of knowing in the spotlight – rather than simply the condition of knowledge – and shows how this provocation emerges organically from the matrix of Shakespeare’s works. It is alert both to inscribed acts of blind-sighting within the texts, and to the text or action blind-sighting the reader or spectator – and what insights such blindness might offer. Obscurity has a hallowed genealogy in literary traditions, both creative and critical. Narratives hold on to their secrets, luring interpreters to navigate the precarious waters between what Frank Kermode calls the “the latent” and “the manifest” in his provocative essay on hermeneutics: his “interpretation of interpretation.”<sup>28</sup> This is a zone that our volume seeks to probe, even if charting it might be a contradiction in terms. The aim is not so much to resolve, or dissolve, the mystery – though unveiling may sometimes be a by-product – as to grasp the process by which literary works invite and induce unsuspected ways of perceiving that go beyond mere seeing. To an extent, this is about finding ways of accessing inaccessibility as a productive textual artefact that trains us to be receptive to more than the primary sense, and opens us up to knowledges that lurk beneath the verisimilar surface, resisting reducibility.

Philip Weinstein, in *Unknowing: the work of Modernist Fiction*, offers a brilliant explication of modernism as a reaction against, and undoing of, the epistemic project of realism in post-Enlightenment fiction.<sup>29</sup> Focusing on Proust, Kafka and Faulkner as his indicative examples, Weinstein shows these artists embracing unknowing as a route into a different kind of knowing from the one premised on realist narrative’s denials: its denial of its own emplotments, its disowning of its own manipulation of the unknowable, and its fabrication of the fantasy of a fit between the knowing subject and the knowable object, whether the latter is the self or the other or the world. Modernist fiction’s refusal of such fantasies, Weinstein argues, “releases narrative from the failed project of knowing”; its engagements must be understood not as knowing but as acknowledgement, eschewing epistemological control and commodification (5). Weinstein identifies this liberation as a response to realism inspired by two centuries of Enlightenment and its project of knowing, though he gestures back towards Bacon’s observational procedures and Descartes’s formulation of the knowing subject as he glances *en passant* at the prehistories of the Enlightenment narrative (3). Yet Bacon, the oft-cited progenitor of the long Enlightenment, understood the limits of knowing: in the context of the knowledge of God, or of excellence, he can only speak of “no knowledge, but wonder, which is nothing else but contemplation broken off, or losing itself”.<sup>30</sup>

Many of the textual moves Weinstein locates in modernist prose fiction are noticeable in the early modern period, perhaps most notably in Shakespeare. As Stephen Orgel

brilliantly intuited, there is “a poetics of incomprehensibility” written into Shakespeare’s drama which we owe it to the works not to reduce “to our own brand of common sense.”<sup>31</sup> Yet, in the almost three decades since then, criticism has still mostly focused on trying to make sense of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, rather than feeling its way through their non-sense. This book attempts to rectify that blind spot of criticism. What settled hermeneutic positions might such recalcitrance be reacting to? Or are such resistances more embedded in early modern approaches to knowledge, but elude existing paradigms? The formal translations here are distinct, but the probing of unknowing, intimations, obstructed knowledge, or indirection, as conditions of a re-oriented and re-calibrated attention, is an integral part of Shakespeare’s dramatic technique and his vision of how we represent and relate to the world around us. Theseus, the rationalist, mocks “apprehension” and champions “cool reason’s comprehension”. But as Hippolyta intuits, the shared perceptual errors – pertinently, the result of a “hateful imperfection of [the] eye” – that might seem to do anything but bringing clear knowledge, “grows to something of great constancy / But, howsoever, strange and admirable” (4.1.63; 5.1.26–7). The double adversative – “but, howsoever” – captures precisely the paradox of distorted vision as a productive artefact. When Posthumus asks at a critical moment in the final scene of *Cymbeline*, “How come these *staggers* upon me?” (5.2.233) [*italics mine*], the sense is one of cognitive tottering and bewilderment, given the context of multiple revelations of misrecognitions – which Belarius names “error” (5.5.260) – and “recognitions” dizzily piled on one another; from this excess of “matter” (5.5.243), a distilled knowledge is gleaned when Posthumus and Imogen embrace in reunion and reify and embody the tree image encoded in the riddle on the tablet Posthumus discovered on his bosom on waking from his dream of Jupiter: “Hang there like fruit, my soul, / Till the tree die” (5.5.263–4). As the soothsayer proceeds, shortly after this moment, to offer his “construction” of the tablet (5.5.434–445), his explication feels redundant, for its truth – at least for the audience – has already been absorbed visibly into felt experience. Posthumus’s distinction between “collection” and “construction” at this point (432, 433) is significant, as they gesture towards two modes of knowing, in a play that keeps positing the affective language of the theatre audaciously against interpretation and explication, as a less definable but more vivid and capacious cognitive alternative. It is a mode of knowing that works through staggers, a feeling of déjà vu, or a sense of disorientation, through barely grasped but nonetheless felt traces: a dream-like haunting which is, notwithstanding, “like” “the action of [one’s] life” (5.4.149). In a different key, what are the implications of the games of knowledge that Edgar plays with his blind father, or (in a comic context) Lancelot Gobbo with his, and Malcolm with Macduff, setting up false trials of their own? These perplexities in the plot do not fit established epistemic narratives; we do not quite know how to make sense of them. When Polonius talked about how we, in our reach for wisdom, “with windlasses and assays of bias / By indirections find directions out”, his immediate context is strategic – imagined as “a bait of falsehood that takes the carp of truth” (2.1.62–3; 60). This pompous old man’s own pleonastic circuitousness as he expounds on the acuity of round-about routes to knowing raises a smile. But the image has a wider resonance for Shakespeare’s own textual strategies, as he characteristically subjects them to gentle mockery. A windlass is a winch – usually in a ship – which hauls an object or a weight up through cranking; but it is the context suggested by the *OED* which is perhaps more relevant here: its original reference to a manoeuvre of interruption in a game of hunting. “Assays of bias” are

circular moves, curving rather than direct, by which, in a game of bowls, the player brings the ball round through bias rather than trying to aim directly at the Jack.

The essays in this volume are all, in one sense or another, blind-spot-spotters. They make us look hard at the things that go bump in the text or in systems of knowledge: small things that do not fit, are not what they seem, which throw us, but lead us to worlds elsewhere – to what Bottom calls “deep things” – if we know how to outstare them. Such are the seemingly nonsensical linguistic knots in *Twelfth Night* that Adam Zucker points us to: once we are jolted to look differently, they bristle with sense. The “baffles” of this play are apparently obstructive mechanical levers, like Polonius’s “assays”, making us gaze intensely where our eyes would normally glaze over. Like the device that acts as a “problem-solving [barrier]” in the making of rockets, these inscribed linguistic obscurities are shown by Adam to be an inset figure and analogue for the hermeneutic challenges produced by the distance of time and cultural context in our encounters with the play(s); they push us to forge new reading strategies in response to the unsettling of assumed knowledges and temporal alienation.

Gil Harris’s essay links up with Adam’s in zooming in on things that seem foreign, literally and epistemologically, and then making wonder seem familiar by showing how they act as a contact zone between worlds divided by time and space. His focus is Shakespeare’s “nuts”, and his hinterland the blind spots in Shakespeare’s own understanding of these threshold spaces. In the process, he provocatively gestures at new, twenty-first-century approaches to Shakespeare, informed by critical positions that accommodate global and multicultural translations. Located in the “edible contact zone”, the nutty protagonist of Gil’s narrative identifies somatic agency as the blind spot of ethnography and cultural criticism.

Cutting right to the heart of the physiological metaphor, Supriya Chaudhuri’s essay offers a perfect example of how blind spots in the text induce a diversion of normal routes of seeing. Through a phenomenologically layered argument, she demonstrates how Othello’s inferential and understood knowledge, derived through mis-seeing what is not there to be seen, is taken by him to be “ocular proof”. The optical process of supplementation from off-scene (or obscene) information is, here, shown to find a catastrophic analogue in a character’s incapacity to see what makes him see.<sup>32</sup> This may prompt the further question of the relative agencies and motives of such circumstantial information-gathering, for in this analogy, the manipulative Iago is the operative counterpart of the brain’s act of automatic visual compensation, with no human choice involved. What does the crafty epistemic agent in a play do to what Supriya illuminates as the impotency of the audience as knowing subjects? At the heart of her discussion is the overvaluation of a single material sign which the play empties out through its own art of losing – that site of blindness where the forensic process is fated to flounder, but which the theatre can see and show by turning signs into phantasms.<sup>33</sup> Through a glance at Jonson’s *Volpone*, she leaves us reflecting on comic undervaluation of such objects as a response to tragic over-investment.

But the essays are united not only by their interest in the productive paradox of obfuscated or hindered knowledge. They are also engaged with the epistemic and hermeneutic purchase of unknowability. Aweek Sen’s essay brings together two kinds of blind spots: the willed obscurity of disowned knowledges and the indeterminate

openness of performative embodiment. It is the former that his reading of *Othello* through the lens of Henry James sets out to minutely trace, provocatively suggesting that Shakespeare must have known his James.<sup>34</sup> But in the process, it ponders the implications of form in speculating about Emilia as a “probable and possible woman incarnated in the theatre”, pointing us to the “Emilia-shaped hole” in the texture of the “small beer” scene. This gives us a way of seeing many similar blind spots in the play: for instance, in the Desdemona-shaped hole in Emilia’s Folio-unique speech on men at the end of the “willow scene” (4.3.86–103). Imogen Stubbs’s Desdemona hugged and bonded with Zoe Wanamaker’s Emilia through this speech in Trevor Nunn’s 1989 production; in Janet Suzman’s landmark 1987 production, Joanna Weinberg as Desdemona lightly, almost absently, touched Dorothy Goulde/Emilia’s cheek and went off alone in her own direction; other Desdemonas have filled the gap by widening it, inscribing a failure of solidarity and solace. Theatrical interpretation can play with such indeterminacies and inflect the genre of a play. But the play itself can play a game of knowledges against performative intent, defying it with a live, intractable core. Like Cressida who remains the unknown quantity in her play, the residue of the unknowable is shown, ironically, to preserve Emilia’s tragic potential in the midst of her generic degradation through handkerchiefs and whispers - not so much what she un-knew as what we can never know about what she “thought ... then.”

A generic theme runs through several of our essays, whether explicitly or subliminally, and suggests further connections. A single play – *Othello* – undergoes a journey through genres from Cinthio’s comic novella through Shakespeare’s wrenchingly painful play to Volpone’s comedic slamming of the drama of knowledge, across Supriya and Aveek’s essays; by the time it reaches Henry James in Aveek’s study, its genre is too post-lapsarian to fit into a known typology, whether narrative or dramatic. Stephen Spiess discusses Shakespearean “comic” violence as a site of misrecognition – both in the sense that it is a response to epistemic instability and insecurity, and in its propensity to beget misreadings. Reading *The Comedy of Errors* against the grain of established critical hermeneutics leads to a (mis)reading of such errors, which at once reveals their implicit investments and unlocks knowledges that they veil. Putting pressure on violence as a marker at once of obfuscation and authenticity across the divide between subjection and subjecthood, this essay invites us to revisit the generic implications of Adam’s, where linguistic “blind spots” produce hilarious but intimate asymmetries that test the limits of comedy. It also enters into implicit dialogue with Supriya’s by positing a reading strategy that turns the phantasmic *underfreighting* of frivolous violence into a legible but embodied sign. In showing how error and errancy come together in the play’s beatings and blows, it asks whether comedy itself has become a potential blind spot of criticism, generating a resolute, homogenising unreading that obscures the distinct ethical and emotional knowledges offered by the very ‘meaninglessness’ of humorous aggression in the plural ecologies of early modern theatres and streets.

Tanya Pollard, meanwhile, highlights the generic stakes of knowledge and its gaps, showing how the mis-cognition and mis-re-cognition of kin and kind, gene and genre, in *The Winter’s Tale* bring the blind spots of life and literature into dialogue, and further face us with the implications of the blind spots of generic reception. After all, as Zachary Lesser points out in his response, “mongrel tragicomedy” – like collaborative writing – slipped through the hole in John Heminges and Henry

Condell's retinal map of Shakespeare's plays: *Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories and Tragedies*.<sup>35</sup> As Tanya provocatively suggests, "bastards baffle recognition" when it comes to literary kind, standing in for unacknowledgable genetic mixtures – like Adam's baffles, they are non-compliant elements in a generic field that induce radical affective cognition by obstructing received modes of knowing. The blind spotting of genre inevitably questions the cultural work of reception, whether in the theatre or in criticism and textual scholarship. It also brings up evolving questions about what the cognitive mechanism of data tools can tell us about generic textures, and our assumptions about genre, as text-analysis of Shakespeare through Docuscope at Carnegie Mellon has done.<sup>36</sup>

Blind spots in works of art have a way of bringing into play a variety of critical approaches, as our essays show us: the conception of this book partly intuitively that. But one would not necessarily have guessed what methodology may have to do with what we want art to do for us, and how we deal with and wield both available and inaccessible knowledges in our individual and communal lives; let alone when we put the human need to know in the hands of a machine. Michael Witmore and Jonathan Hope's dialogue on machine learning and Shakespeare is a revealing point of departure as we test *methods* of interrogating literary texts, what they tell us and what they withhold, and what their blind spots tell us about ours. When we put our humanistic questions about, say, attribution, to a neural network – that is, an algorithm trained to home in on patterns – we are entrusting the process of recognition to a system which delivers accuracy but defies explanation or representation. Machines, after all, pick up syntagmatic structures easily, but have little yield on language that has paradigmatic flexibility or polysemic density. For Mike, the refusal of that transparency is the black box that hides the antecedents of the results in our encounter with its meaning-making. But in the very process, it becomes, for him, a mimetic mirror for a particular epistemic desire and its operative conditions – our desire to apprehend the invisible blind spot "where a literary and linguistic self hides". But Jonathan turns this very inscrutability into an invitation to re-examine the blind spots that are embedded in Shakespearean (or poetic) language itself; for him this impasse does not invalidate but redirects the human reader. His provocation is to posit mechanical mistranslation as the productive blind spot which enables us to see deep patterns of language functioning and the quantitative basis of what we, as literary scholars, are trained to think of as the qualitative essence or distinction of an author or style: polysemy, for instance. Using Google Translate's machine learning algorithm as an example, Jonathan argues that while the model itself defies direct visualisation, it almost literally diverts our eye to the neighbourhood of a word, selected according to its vector or string of properties: like the surrounding information to which the brain directs the eye to fill in the lacuna of the *punctum caecum*. This makes me recall a little experiment that Mike did for me with a vector space model, mapping early modern words of investigation and enquiry along an axis associated with gender. To my surprise, "discover" seemed to co-occur with words aligned with femininity. On looking harder, we saw that it was in fact the passive form "discovered" that was feminine, and looking in the lexical neighbourhood revealed that "discoveries" was in fact comfortably clustered in the extreme "male" corner with "discerning", "experimental", and "demonstration". In the light of Mike's digital experiment, then, I can understand Jonathan's point about the detection of directionalities: "assays of bias" push us to the thresholds of the linguistic system and show us a kind of cultural calibration occurring around charged

terms.

And so a dialogue becomes a conversation; one which Zack joins in, crossing over from a different conversation. For he asks what human mistranslations of some of the most oft-quoted lines from Shakespeare tell us about the blind spots of quotation itself as an act of cultural remembrance. Zack combines statistical analysis and human interpretation to put pressure on the persistent but identical misquotation of a line from Hamlet's soliloquy, by editors, scholars, actors and random users of the "Yahoo Answers" website. His findings redirect our attention to a discernible desire for Shakespeare to sound "Shakespearean": that idea of authorial distinction that Mike and Jonathan explore in the context of the mistranslation of machines in attribution studies. It is significant that Zack, like them, alights on "To be or not to be" – perhaps the most "Shakespearean" soliloquy in the cultural imaginary. "Conscience doth make cowards of us all", through the tiny replacement of "does" with "doth", along with the capitalization of "c" in "Conscience", and the excision of "Thus" to begin with this word, face us with a collective, unconscious and historically ongoing but evolving longing for Shakespeare to be marked by elevation, archaism, formality, piety, and proverbial wisdom – suitable for commonplacing. A common misquotation of Gertrude is shown to be driven by similar investments, but mis-correction (or over-correction) becomes in turn the further blind spot of reception and memory, whether in critical or editorial practice or in the history of reading or spectating – making us re-think the relation between error and misremembering. In the spirit of this volume, a personal anecdote may not be out of place. My Italian friends Nubar and Pallina were travelling in Scotland when they met a couple of Scotsmen with whom they got talking about political theory. These new acquaintances kept asking them eager questions about "Gromsky's" influence on them. Initially befuddled, Nubar eventually saw beyond what had seemed a mere mistake. These idealistic and somewhat awe-struck leftist young men clearly wanted Gramsci (whom they had distantly heard of) to be a Trotsky (whom they "knew"); the mishearing/misremembering/mistranslating came out of an inarticulate fantasy of a unified – and therefore easily grasped – Great Marxist Tradition, revolutionary and seamless through times and cultures.<sup>37</sup> How would Stephen and Adam extend their thoughts on mistaking, after such knowledge?

Such questions arising, and leaving a space for yet unspoken answers, brings me to the shape of this book.

### III. 'The forms of things unknown'<sup>38</sup>

Tracing the unknowable back into modes of knowing so far unexplored or merely intuited, then, is the main conceptual aim of this book – pitching into a critical terrain which has seen stirrings of interest in alternative epistemes.<sup>39</sup> But it is not its only aim. We also have a methodological and pedagogic mission, which makes the volume structurally and intellectually innovative. While the essays are thematically connected, the volume is structured as an internal dialogue. Each essay is followed by either one substantial response from another contributor, or two shorter responses from two contributors. The impulse behind such a novel format is an urge to capture a vital part of intellectual life within present-day academia. So many conversations we have at seminars and conferences, or indeed more informally over coffee, simply dissolve and scatter. This is an attempt to find a home within academic publishing for



such dialogical thinking and “talking”. Some of the essays in this volume come out of a seminar which made us feel the urgency to channel such conversations into a less evanescent form, without losing the openness of address and response.<sup>40</sup> Through its unusual and experimental format, this book seeks to stake out a place, and a voice, for a particular kind of dialogic and processive intellectual energy rather than letting it dissipate; to encourage cross-fertilisation while thoughts are fresh and explorative; and to translate a sense of intellectual “community” into print. It is also designed to write fun and play back into scholarship. Finally, it aims to catch the alertness induced and kept alive by interruption and questioning; a synecdochic exercise in dwelling in a state of critical vulnerability, anticipation and readiness. In that spirit, it is structured to invite stoppages and deviations. While it is woven out of a shared process of thinking and cross-thinking, it is happy to be a “broken woof”.

The only book in the field of Shakespeare studies, and to the best of my knowledge, early modern criticism, that has attempted to break the mould in a comparable, though distinct, way is Anthony Dawson and Paul Yachnin’s *The Culture of Playgoing in Shakespeare’s England*. Shaped provocatively as a ‘collaborative debate’, they foreground ‘creative disagreement’ as a way of reading that does justice to the heterogeneity of the Shakespearean theatre.<sup>41</sup> Our book shares their anti-totalising impulse, and their sense of co-thinking as a dynamic process; but our conversation is more heteroglossic, and we allow the responses to flow naturally into various forms: demurrals, questioning, expansion, diversion and extraction. The result is not so much unification as an opening up through crossovers. The dialogic form seems not just pedagogically relevant but methodologically inevitable: textual blindspotting, no less than blind spots, operates in that Barthesian interspace where the subtle mess of life constantly challenges the ‘purported clarities’ of organised knowledge.<sup>42</sup> The centrality of encounter in the textual experience of conspicuous obscurities could not but be built into the structure of a book about blind spots. The constraint of space means that we cannot bring the dialogue round full circle, except perhaps in one inset dialogue (that between Mike and Jonathan who respond to each other as their topics are specifically interrelated and integral to their ongoing collaborative work). But in juxtaposing each “speaking out” with a response (or two), we want at least to give form to a mode of critical activity, and to present the initiation of an ongoing to and fro of ideas that shapes some of our liveliest critical thoughts. In the spirit of unfinished exchange, we have deliberately retained a certain informality of presentation. The aim is not only to suggest a new, collaborative model of scholarly conversation and revive the lamentably lost ancient traditions of dialogic pedagogy, but also to encourage younger scholars (and indeed more advanced scholars at a formative and evolving stage of their ideas) to articulate thoughts in progress, in conversation with their peers, and not wait till they feel knowledge has been controlled and chiselled into hermetic, sealed off articles which are too distant from process for others to easily or actively enter. In tune with how the play-texts discussed “know”, the form of the volume tries to be mimetic of an apprehension that preserves the distinction between encounter and knowledge, acknowledgement and mastery.

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<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare, *King Lear: A Parallel Text Edition*, ed. Weis. All references to the play are to this edition.

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<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*. A, 980a. Cp. Plato, *Republic*, VII, 532a.

<sup>3</sup> Berger 7.

<sup>4</sup> Berger 8.

<sup>5</sup> Hakewill. On the precariousness of the visual hegemony in early modern Europe, and the visual crisis that was its other side, see Clark. See also Supriya Chaudhuri's essay in this volume for a discussion of the complexities of the visual culture of this period, via Clark. On the relation between poetic ingenuity and visual anomaly and anamorphism in the seventeenth century, see Gilman. For a fresh study on the optics and poetics of early modern England, see Partner, forthcoming.

<sup>6</sup> *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 4.1.189. All references to Shakespeare's plays and poems are to the Riverside Shakespeare unless otherwise specified.

<sup>7</sup> On the relative transparency and piety of Gertred in Q1, and the relative inscrutability of Folio and Q2's Gertrude, see Kehler.

<sup>8</sup> Berger 8.

<sup>9</sup> I use the term 'cognitive' in a less specialised sense than its technical connotation in cognitive science. But cognitive criticism is a potentially fertile area for the study of blind spots in literary thinking, practice and criticism. There has been much innovative recent work on cognition and early modern literature. For the cognitive turn in Shakespeare studies specifically, see Mary Thomas Crane, *Shakespeare's Brain: Reading with Cognitive Theory* (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 2001), to which most subsequent work is indebted. For more recent studies, see, for instance, Raphael Lyne, *Shakespeare, Rhetoric and Cognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); N. Parvini, *Shakespeare and Cognition: Thinking Fast and Slow through Character* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); and Laurie Johnson, John Sutton and Evelyn Tribble, eds, *Embodied Cognition and Shakespeare's Theatre: The Early Modern Body-Mind* (New York/London: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> "The Fly", in Lucian 82–83; Spenser 289–304; Donne 89. Thanks to Tania Demetriou for introducing me to the Lucian poem in private conversation.

<sup>11</sup> *Julius Caesar* 4.3.140–193. On stage direction and speech headings in this scene, see Daniell, ed., *Julius Caesar*, 289, n. 155.1, and "Introduction", 137–43, esp. 137. See also Stirling.

<sup>12</sup> For a provocative and sensitive, if somewhat schematic, thesis of the static and dynamic models of Stoicism, see A.D. Nuttall, 'The Stoic in Love', in A.D. Nuttall, *The Stoic in Love: Selected Essays on Literature and Ideas* (Savage, Maryland: Barnes and Noble, 1989), 56–67.

<sup>13</sup> Nuttall (1983), 111–13 (112). See also Nuttall (2007), 184–5, where he reads the double announcement more explicitly as a critique of Stoicism: "As Brutus is redeemed, Stoicism is damned" (185). For a congruent position, see the introduction to the Arden Shakespeare edition of the play, ed. Daniell, 139–47.

<sup>14</sup> For an extended discussion of the difficulties of proving marital intention, and of sex itself transiting from a deed to an over-freighted sign in *All's Well* and in Shakespeare's England, see Mukherji (1996). For a discussion of the evidentiary over-valuation and generic negotiation of sensible tokens, see Mukherji (2006).

<sup>15</sup> See Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 8.3.61; see also Eden, esp. 69–75, 86–9, 92–4.

<sup>16</sup> Riverside Shakespeare, 520.

<sup>17</sup> See Aveek Sen's reponse to Tanya Pollard's essay in this volume, unerringly tapping into this hinterland of unspeakable loves and half-remembered texts.

<sup>18</sup> Krauss.

<sup>19</sup> McGuire.

<sup>20</sup> This is Prospero's phrase in *The Tempest*, 1.2.50. On Shakespeare's translation of silence from his sources, see Demetriou; her argument is admiringly discussed by Tony Nuttall in his discussion of *Henry VI* and *Richard II* in Nuttall (2007), 30–31 and 136–37.

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- <sup>21</sup> North, vol. 1, 176.
- <sup>22</sup> Barthes (1978), 18: “La science est grossière, la vie est subtile, et c’est pour corriger cette distance que la littérature nous importe.” Trans. by Richard Howard in Sontag, ed., 457–78 (463).
- <sup>23</sup> Anon., ed. Cannon.
- <sup>24</sup> Chaucer V.1050.
- <sup>25</sup> Heywood, ed. Scobie, scene xiii, l. 41.
- <sup>26</sup> Turgenev 203–73.
- <sup>27</sup> “Le texte pensif”, Barthes (1970), 204–5 (my translation).
- <sup>28</sup> Kermode, esp. Chapter 1, “Carnal and Spiritual Senses”, 1–21 (2).
- <sup>29</sup> Weinstein.
- <sup>30</sup> Bacon vol. 3, 266–7
- <sup>31</sup> Orgel 437
- <sup>32</sup> See Hutson (2012), for suggestive points of contact with this argument. See also her *Circumstantial Shakespeare* (2015).
- <sup>33</sup> For a reading of the increasing evanescence of material objects in Shakespeare and Jonson, with provocative points of contact with this essay, see Dawson and Yachnin, esp. Chapter 6, ‘Props, pleasure and idolatry’, 131–58.
- <sup>34</sup> For a congruent reading of resisted knowledges in Shakespeare and James’s heroines, albeit in a non-optical framework, see Mukherji (2007), 53–4.
- <sup>35</sup> Heminges and Condell. “Mongrel tragicomedy” is Sidney’s term: Sidney, ed. Alexander, 46.
- <sup>36</sup> See also Witmore and Hope (2007).
- <sup>37</sup> I happily acknowledge Georgio (Nubar) Gianighian and Pallina Pavanini for a delightful conversation about this in Venice, 17 September, 2017.
- <sup>38</sup> *Dream*, 5.1.15)
- <sup>39</sup> Early modern “knowledge studies” has become increasingly visible in the last decade in the literary critical domain, going back to field-creating books such as Mary Poovey’s *A History of the Modern Fact* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998) and Mary Baine Campbell’s *Wonder and Science: Imagining Worlds in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004). The time may have come for the much-needed turn from the topics of knowledge to themes of ignorance, stupidity, befuddlement, and forms of knowledge refusal. For early indications, see, for example, Adam Zucker’s “*Twelfth Night* and the Philology of Nonsense”, in *Renaissance Studies*, Vol. 30, Issue 1, February 2016, 88–101; Carla Mazzio’s *The Inarticulate Renaissance: Language Trouble in an Age of Eloquence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); or Katherine Eggert’s *Disknowledge: Literature, Alchemy and the End of Humanism in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).
- <sup>40</sup> “The Blind Spots of Knowledge in Shakespeare and his World”, convened by Subha Mukherji, at The Shakespeare Association of America’s Annual Meeting at St. Louis in 2014.
- <sup>41</sup> Dawson and Yachnin, eds, 1.
- <sup>42</sup> Barthes (1978), 18.

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